

ZEN AND THE ART OF CURATION

June 29, 2012 Valerie M. J. Hall Day of Archaeology 2012, Finds Anthropology, Archaeological field survey, Archaeology, Artifact, Chesapeake, Chesapeake Archaeology, Chesapeake Bay, Comparative Archaeological Study of Colonial Chesapeake Culture, Curation, [http](http://www.chesapeakearchaeology.org/index.cfm), Illinois, Illinois Archaeology, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, lithics, Maryland, Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, Prairie Research Institute, provenience, University of Illinois, University of Illinois-Champaign, Virginia

Greetings from the Illinois State Archaeological Survey, a division of the Prairie Research Institute at the University of Illinois-Champaign! Recently, I have been spending my days in the lab helping to update and transcribe site inventories into a digital database. The excavations that produced these artifacts were conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, and the only inventories that exist are on hard copy. Additionally, some of the artifacts are still in their original paper collection bags. I am currently relabeling and rebagging artifacts, mostly lithics, and entering catalogue and provenience information into a digital database. (*Provenience* refers to the exact location on the site at which the artifact was found; as opposed to the “Antiques Roadshow” term *provenance*, which refers to the entire history of the object from its discovery to the present). It is important to curate these items using materials and technology that will help to preserve both the artifacts and their associated provenience information.

While this task might not entail bullwhip-cracking excitement and Spielberg-worthy finds, I think it is every bit as valuable as the discovery of a new site, the excavation of a unique artifact, or the ground-breaking research taking place daily. This is due in part to my recent completion of a Master’s thesis in which I analyzed artifacts from the Chesapeake Bay region, despite living about 800 miles away in the Midwest. I was able to conduct a majority of my research and some data collection using the Comparative Archaeological Study of Colonial Chesapeake Culture database (<http://www.chesapeakearchaeology.org/index.cfm>), created by the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory and other Chesapeake archaeologists and collaborators. This information was available to me thanks to the careful curation and meticulous inventorying of thousands of artifacts by Tidewater archaeologists in Maryland and Virginia.

As I work on curating the artifacts and information from excavations conducted years ago in Illinois, my recent research experience is always in the back of my mind. I hope that our careful curation of the artifacts from decades-old excavations will assist researchers investigating these sites to more easily access this information. The field of archaeology continues to advance both

technologically and theoretically, and it is important to preserve artifacts and information as completely as possible to assist future researchers in the reinvestigation and reanalysis of previously-excavated sites. Who knows what exciting reinterpretations might someday be based on these nondescript bags of broken rocks?



These chert samples were collected from a site investigated in the 1960s and 1970s.